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Contact: Oversight and Government Reform Press Office, (202) 225-5051

Chairman Towns Launches Investigation into Health Effects of DoD Waste Management Policies

Exposure to toxins may be cause of serious illnesses among troops, civilian workers returning from Iraq, Afghanistan

WASHINGTON – Chairman Edolphus “Ed” Towns (D-NY) is taking steps to understand why hundreds of military personnel and civilian workers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan have reported that they are now suffering from a variety of serious health issues ranging from asthma to cancers. Health experts have alleged that the illnesses may be related to toxic exposures from improper waste management procedures, including “burn pits” in Iraq and Afghanistan. The lessons of Agent Orange made it clear that when returning soldiers suffer from rare and often difficult to diagnose illnesses, remaining committed to determining the causes of the illnesses is imperative. Chairman Towns is dedicated to addressing the illnesses, determining their causes and ensuring the appropriate medical treatments are available to returning troops and civilians.

In a letter to Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, Chairman Towns requested an explanation for the Department of Defense’s rationale for using burn pits along with a list of all military sites in Iraq and Afghanistan that operated burn pits since 2001, including the dates of operation and size of each burn pit. The chairman is also seeking any information about serious health issues military and civilian personnel have developed after returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

“Reports that our troops are suffering from serious illnesses as a result of improper waste management and exposure to harmful toxins while bravely serving the nation are deeply troubling,” said Chairman Towns. “We must determine what is compromising the health and welfare of these men and women and confront the situation before more people become ill.”

Specifically, the health issues associated with exposure to poor waste management and burn pits include asthma, severe bronchiolitis, chronic coughs, skin infections, Parkinson’s disease, leukemia and rare cancers. The chairman is deeply concerned that the proximity of active burn pits to living quarters, dining areas and other posts, as well as exposure by those working on the pits daily is causing the illnesses. Therefore, Chairman Towns wants DoD to turn over all environmental and risk assessments, reports or memoranda since 2001 that examined the

potential health effects associated with military sites in Iraq or Afghanistan related to air quality, wastewater contamination, waste management or toxic exposures as well as all complaints or allegations since 2001 involving health or environmental effects related to waste management or toxic exposures.

To provide context for the investigation, Secretary Gates was asked to produce all reports, studies and memorandums addressing the rates of cancers, neurological disorders and respiratory illnesses for veterans, active personnel and civilians serving in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2001. Chairman Towns also requested that DoD provide information on the number, type and age of onset for all tumors occurring in active or retired personnel reported to DoD's tumor registry from 1992 to 2001 and 2002 to the present.

"I am firmly committed to ensuring that we properly assess these illnesses, determine the causes and provide the appropriate medical treatment to our troops and veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan," said Chairman Towns. "I look forward to receiving the Department's response and moving forward with this investigation."

The full text of the letter from Chairman Towns to Secretary Gates is below.

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Documents and Links

[Letter from Chairman Edolphus Towns to Secretary of Defense Robert Gates](#)